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Introduction

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Introduction

It seems indisputable that retirement communities have established themselves in the United States as a viable housing option for older people. What is disputable, however, is a clear understanding of what is meant by the term "retirement community." This lack of a consensus definition has resulted in a rather fragmented body of knowledge about retirement communities. It has thus been difficult to develop a general understanding of how retirement communities are planned and developed, how they evolve, and how they meet the needs and capabilities of older people of various ages and circumstances.

In a national study on which this book is based,* we have defined retirement communities quite broadly so as not to exclude potentially significant retirement housing options open to older people. To make our broad perspective of retirement communities meaningful, it must be possible to classify the communities in a manner which reflects their similarities and differences. It is this logic which fostered the development of our typology. A typology makes it possible to compare the development and experiences of a wide range of retirement communities on a comparative basis. Such analyses should shed insight into the relative strengths and weaknesses of various types of retirement communities with respect to the varying needs, capabilities, and desires of older people.

To develop and illustrate our typology, we have organized this book as a series of ten case studies which examine a wide range of retirement communities in depth. While we analyzed eighteen communities, it was felt that the selection of two representative cases for each community type would be sufficient to provide the necessary in-depth profile without exhausting the reader and at the same time avoiding unnecessary redundancy. These case studies are preceded by a review of the retirement community literature and a discussion of how we have defined and classified retirement communities into a multi-dimensional typology. The case studies are followed by a

*Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Grant Number 90AR-0011/02.

summary chapter which synthesizes the experiences and characteristics of all eighteen communities we investigated. Thus, we feel this book represents a resource which can be used to study individual retirement communities in depth, and/or to study the similarities and differences among retirement communities with respect to the typology we have developed.

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